

A Conversation about Science



Lev Tolstoy

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(1875-1876)

June 4. Nickolaj Nikolayevich was invited by a neighbor. Evidently, the neighbor Ivan P. regarded Nickolaj Nikolayevich as a smart and educated man, and this time especially appreciated the visit of my principal, because he wanted to get him together with a professor of history, who just arrived from Moscow. He begged him not to refuse. Like all silly, trivial people, I.P. found it delightful to listen to the conversations of smart people, while barely understanding them. We went there. During the lunch, professor with a beard was placed next to Nikolai Nikolayevich - the hosts were obviously getting them closer together. Nikolay Nikolayevich was a kind person, and even though he, better than any other, saw the humor of this tournament before the gallery, as he calls it, but, to not to disappoint the owners, was ready to enter into a dispute and teased the professor, especially that he always has an argument during lunch, but the professor kept silence, as it seemed to me, with contempt. The professor was one of those young scientists, who likes to say: nothing can be done, as for me - I live honestly, etc. But his face looks smart, solid, and quiet. Apparently, he feels “ferre a glace” (well grounded), especially in his subject. In the afternoon, a dispute began about history, about the law of progress.

Nikolai Nikolayevich said that the law of progress, which is the only governing thread of history, certainly is not proven and is more than dubious.

- How come, - he repeated several times – there’s the law of progress for the world history, and yet 90% of humanity: China, Asia, and Africa, follow the reversed law.

The professor answered that the law of progress is seen in all peoples historical, and that science has nothing to do with pre-historic peoples.

Nikolay Nikolayevich got hesitated and confused.

- So, you don't even want to know about them?

Professor: - They do not fall within the scope of science.

Nikolay Nikolayevich went silent.

We were driving home and there, during our trip, esprit de l'escalier of Nikolai Nikolayevich (as he calls his judgments about the impressions of the day), especially played out. And I memorized and wrote down this "mind of stairs" because his expressions seem to me remarkable.

- It doesn't belong to science, not in the scope of it, - he repeated to me the words of the professor. – Have you heard our dispute?

-Yes, partly.

- Note, what's funny, - he said to me, with his meek smart smile, - the funny thing is that history only interested in philosophical thought of the history. I.e. law, which it based on, which they found in history. What I have to do with who Hannibal conquered or what mistresses Louis XIV had. I'm interested in the law, i.e. what comes out of this, but he says: the law of progress. And when I want to check the law, he says: check it only according to our science, which is based on this law. I.e., I argue that this piece of land is smaller than 100 meters, and he says: measure it not with yours but with my instrument – it's exactly 100 meters. But I measured myself. They say that before asking, whether science is valid: trust the science, study it, just as religious missionaries say. Learn it, work on it, dedicate 10 years to it, lose your hair over it, then you won't doubt it. And, really, you won't doubt because you'll pity the labor and years spent on it.

He already cannot agree with me. He must renounce 10 years of works. God forbid.

But the main point is that this trick - not welcoming objections but elimination of any dispute, was recently coined in all the areas of science and is very dexterous. Main interest is precisely its philosophical meaning, i.e. I want to know what truth history proves, what comes out of the fact that there

were Punicheskija and other wars, and the laws are such and such. I want to know what comes out of the fact that the nerve reacts, and sugar is produced in the liver, and there is such and such theory of criminal law.

I ask: what then, is humanity improving or not, is soul immortal, is death penalty just etc. I'm told: vous etes hors la question, cela n'est pas du domaine de la science (you go beyond the question, it does not belong to the field of science). Just like at a public meeting of the society, where they talk about when to serve lunch, and an imprudent member awkwardly asks what the society has accomplished. "You are beyond the topic, you're beyond the science."

Earlier, each field of science didn't separate itself from philosophical questions associated with it; now history tells directly that questions about the purpose of the mankind, about the laws of its development – are beyond science. Physiology says that it knows the ways nerves react, but questions about freedom or non-freedom of a human are outside of its area. Jurisprudence says that it knows the history of the origin of such and such the regulations but to the question of to what extent these regulations meet our ideal of justice are out of its area, and so on. Even worse - medicine says: this disease of yours is outside of the science. What the hell do I need your science for? I'd rather play chess. Their only true legitimacy is only in their ability to answer my questions. Instead, you all are studying for the fun of studying, though you know that you won't learn anything.

- So what to do? - I asked.

- The same. This is nobody's fault. This impotence of knowledge, - this forbidding to a man of partaking of the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, is a constant property of humanity. Need to say only this. Don't need to be proud. What am I proud of, that I'll know to the slightest details the value of each hieroglyph, but still will be unable to understand the meaning of the hieroglyphic inscription?

- They hope to understand it, - I said.

- Hope. It is time to understand that this hope lives 3,000 historical years, and

we have not moved even one hair closer to knowing what fairness is, what freedom is, what the meaning of human life is. And playing chess is pleasant pastime; but there is no reason to be proud, and even less – to despise those people who do not know how to play chess.